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ABSTRACT

The primary goal of a districtwide dropout-prevention program is to develop, implement, and enhance instructional and programmatic components that have proven effective in educational research and practice and thus resulted in fewer students dropping out of school prior to high school graduation. This paper describes the development and implementation of a districtwide dropout-prevention model in the Tucson (Arizona) Unified School District (TUSD), called Priority One. The district developed six program-component strands for staff development: a teachers-as-tutoring program, summer school scholarships, incentives, target allocations, and districtwide efforts. The first full year of implementation was 1993-94. The district dropout rate for grades 7-12 decreased from 8.1 percent during 1993-94 to 7.9 percent during 1994-95 to 7.35 percent during 1995-96. There was also a substantial reduction in the Native American dropout rate, which was attributed to the efforts of an advocate for Native American students. Three tables are included. (Contains eight references.) (LMI)

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DROPOUT PREVENTION

Tucson Unified School District

PRIORITY ONE

PRIORITY ONE: Developing and Implementing a Model for Comprehensive District-wide Dropout Prevention

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PRIORITY ONE: **Developing and Implementing a Model for Comprehensive District-wide Dropout Prevention**

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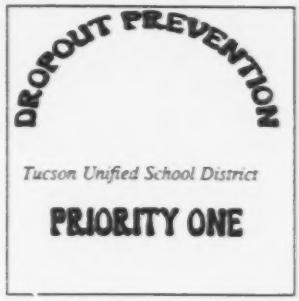

Typically, dropout prevention can be viewed educationally as efforts that may begin in high school with students who are failing and/or focus on students who are formally labeled as "at-risk." Although, this focus is certainly a valid component of dropout prevention, it should be appropriately categorized as dropout intervention and/or retrieval.

In order for a school district to truly implement a system-wide dropout prevention effort, various program strands, K through 12, should be developed to address issues that affect dropout prevention, intervention, and retrieval; thereby increasing the potential for the success of students throughout the educational system. The primary goal of a district-wide dropout prevention program is to develop, implement, and enhance instructional and programmatic components that have proven effective in educational research and practice, and thus resulted in fewer students dropping out of school prior to high school graduation.

A variety of research studies have identified a myriad of risk factors that characterize students who might be in danger of dropping out of school. Some prime examples include:

- Frequent absenteeism
- Behind in credit accumulation, grade level, and/or older than classmates
- Poor academic performance
- School transitions, both to middle and high school
- A poor connection to a supportive peer group and/or positive role models
- The abuse of alcohol and drugs and/or experiences of neglect or abuse at home
- Detention, suspension, expulsion, and/or involvement with juvenile authorities
- Low aspirations and expectations, i.e., parents who dropped out, did not graduate, etc.
- Pregnancy
- Financial hardship and/or the attractiveness of work

Of course, none of these warning signals, individually or in any particular combination, insures failure for any student. And, likewise, the absence of these indicators does not guarantee student success. However, some combination of these factors can greatly contribute to any student's failure to achieve basic skill mastery on grade level, to stay in school through high school graduation, to develop functional mental health skills, and/or to avoid anti-social or illegal acts.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE DROPOUT PREVENTION PROGRAMS

In order to ensure that the primary focus of a district-wide dropout prevention program is to develop, implement, and enhance instructional and programmatic components that have proven effective, specific components should be included:

- Intensive attendance outreach
- Mentoring and tutoring
- Staff development
- Parent involvement and use of parents and all other available resources
- Partnerships that tie high school graduation to the promise of a job
- Internship and authentic learning programs
- Summer enhancement programs
- Flexible schedules and alternative programs

WHY FOCUS ON DROPOUT PREVENTION?

The Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) was founded in 1867 and today is the second largest school district in the state of Arizona. Presently, the district is comprised of 106 elementary, middle, high school, and alternative programs that enroll approximately 62,000 students. As part of the District Dropout Prevention Plan, each school and program within the district has a current plan focused on dropout prevention strategies with students, staff, parents, and community members.

What was the impetus for this focus? Four years ago, the Governing Board in collaboration with the Superintendent identified a need to develop a District-

Wide Dropout Prevention Plan dedicated to one main goal: To significantly decrease the number of students who drop out of school before graduation.

After assuming this responsibility, the first task I had to initiate was the formation of a Dropout Prevention Advisory Council. This council currently consisting of some forty-five teachers, administrators, staff, community members, and students is open to any new member and has devoted all efforts toward the following Mission: By creating an equitable, diverse, and quality educational environment conducive to living, learning, and teaching; TUSD will ensure that all students graduate from high school.

This council initially developed the mission statement and priority goals of the program. Quarterly meetings are held to discuss related issues and facilitate evaluation of the district plan. In addition, council members participate in several subcommittees and related activities related. Subcommittees have included Program Evaluation and Parameter Development, Program Marketing and Recognition, Priority One Suggestions, Youth Leadership Conference, High School Issues, Dropout Prevention Summer Institute, and Program Staff Development.

During the first summer of planning and implementation, it was critical to begin an analysis of the available statistics related to enrollment and withdrawal from the district in order to properly assess previous dropout prevention programmatic efforts. In addition, a focus on retrieving and correcting data to accurately reflect the success of the many dropout prevention programs throughout the district was required. As a result,

procedures were developed that would provide the most accurate data for program evaluation.

The first step involved a concerted effort to call or contact over 3000 students who were coded in the database as withdrawn and would have been reported to the state as dropouts unless new information could positively confirm that these students had entered another educational program. The telephone calls provided additional benefits in that they created an opportunity to counsel students regarding various educational options as well as provide encouragement to reenter their home school or an appropriate alternative program.

After the calls were completed, individual school reports were compiled and sent to each middle and high school program for any other updated information. The final information was then collected and reported to the State.

WHAT DOES THE DROPOUT RATE REALLY MEAN?

In order to assess and evaluate dropout prevention efforts, a review of the reported dropout rate is required. It is important to recognize that various definitions are used to define a dropout from state to state. In addition, the formulas used to calculate the dropout rate are sometimes changed from one year to the next. As a result, comparisons across states and/or from year to year are sometimes inappropriate.

However, currently the State of Arizona defines a dropout as a student who was enrolled at the end of the prior school year or at any time during the school year, who was not enrolled at the end of the school year, and whose absence cannot be explained by transfer to another school district, graduation, or death. Using this definition, the dropout rate in the Tucson Unified School District for grades 7 through 12 for the 1993-94 school year was 8.1%. As a result of the reported increase from the previous year and in addition to all routinized procedures and prevention program components, parents of all students who had dropped out of school received a letter asking them to call for information on how to help their child reenroll in school or another alternative program.

WHAT SHOULD THE GOALS BE?

After a review of statistics, priority and target goals were identified to drive dropout prevention plans in the District. The Advisory Council agreed that the attainment of these goals, listed below, would be best accomplished by involving each and every employee in the District in various efforts and program strands.

Priority Goals

- To encourage and support opportunities for staff development and parent involvement for elementary, middle, and high school programs
- To encourage and support successful elementary prevention and intervention strategies
- To identify and implement middle school, high school, and transition alternatives

Target Goals

Year I: End of the 1993-94 School Year

- A formal plan, outlining the district's dropout prevention expectations for all units, including building principals and all site staff to regional superintendents and other central office and instructional support personnel, was presented and approved by the Governing Board.
- A system for identifying students needing additional support at the school level and district-wide as well as a system for conducting a regular auditing of the enrollment and withdrawal database was developed and implemented.
- An informational inventory of dropout prevention and recovery programs available to district students was developed and distributed.
- Direct contact with staff at school sites to encourage dropout prevention and recovery services was ongoing.
- Relevant information and data regarding dropout prevention was solicited from schools and departments.

WHAT ACTIVITIES WILL ACHIEVE THE DROPOUT PREVENTION GOALS?

After the initial statistical review and goal development, tentative implementation plans that would support the identified target goals were developed for the 1993-94 school year. The initial focus included the development of the following:

- A community partnership alternative to address the educational needs of expelled and long term suspended students
- A Dropout Prevention Summer Institute to provide continuing teacher and administrator professional development

- Staff development and ongoing support for Alternative to Suspension Programs at the middle school level
- A specific Native American component to work with all schools to monitor and support student attendance, retrieve and reenroll students who may have dropped out, and to identify community resources and alternatives that would support the educational needs of native students

On a long range basis, the plan that was adopted by the Governing Board to support dropout prevention and produce a reduction of student dropout included

- the development and implementation of a system-wide Pilot Program of Alternatives to Long Term Suspension for middle and high school students
- the planning, development, and implementation of a system of homework options for students on suspension
- the planning, development, and implementation of a system to allow students to earn quarter credits in TUSD high schools as well as to allow students enrolled in alternatives to long term suspension and suspended student homework options the latitude to gain academic credit if criteria are met
- the planning and development of a Truancy Project in collaboration with the County Attorney's Office to support mandatory school attendance requirements
- continued focus on student contact and follow-up to increase retrieval rate and decrease dropout rate.
- the showcasing and marketing of current TUSD Dropout Prevention efforts both internally and externally. Examples:

What is TUSD doing about Dropout Prevention?

Each site, program, and department has submitted strategies that are compiled in this booklet

TUSD Dropout Prevention Planning Handbook

A compilation of current research information and successful dropout prevention programs as well as information on the TUSD Dropout Prevention Plan

TUSD Dropout Prevention Priority One Newsletter

Distributed quarterly to all TUSD Employees

Priority One Suggestions for Dropout Prevention

Available for school and community distribution (English and Spanish)

Pocket Reference Cards

Available for school and community distribution

HOW SHOULD THE COMPONENTS OF THE DROPOUT PREVENTION PLAN BE DELINEATED?

In order to assure that the entire K-12 system was focused on dropout prevention, six program component strands were developed to provide school level as well as individual student support toward graduation. Program allocations and offerings included

1. PRIORITY ONE STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Site requests for funding required the inclusion of a coaching component to improve the possibility of classroom implementation, a site funding match to increase commitment to the program, a plan that identified added duty or Saturday training only to eliminate the need for substitute teachers, and

supported site efforts toward continuous improvement. In general, this component supported staff development in areas such as cooperative learning, learning styles, curriculum integration, curriculum articulation across schools, and conflict resolution training.

2. *TEACHERS AS TUTORS PROGRAM*

An allocation was available to each site for certified teachers to provide tutoring to students in each elementary, middle and high school. All tutoring required an extension of learning time and occurred outside of the regular school day. An Individual Education Plan was developed, monitored, and evaluated for each student tutored.

3. *SUMMER SCHOOL SCHOLARSHIPS*

Scholarships were offered to at-risk elementary, middle, and high school students for extended summer study programs in the district.

4. *PRIORITY ONE INCENTIVES*

In order to encourage all dropout prevention efforts as well as correct data input and data correction at all sites throughout the school year, a monetary incentive was awarded to middle and high schools with lowered and/or zero dropout rate during the school year.

5. *TARGET ALLOCATIONS*

These allocations were provided to selected sites that submitted a plan which addresses one or more pre-identified options. Continued funding was

dependent on documented results that decreased student dropout and/or positively correlated with dropout prevention.

At the elementary level, funding was provided for student transitions during 4th grade, attendance monitoring, and/or tutor/mentor programs. At the middle level, funding supported student transitions from 5th to 6th grade, tutor/mentor programs, attendance monitoring, and/or conflict resolution programs. In addition, a major focus at the middle school level was the implementation of a Learning Center that served as an alternative to long term suspension for students in the district.

At the high school level, funding supported student transitions from 8th to 9th grade, tutor/mentor programs, conflict resolution training and mediation programs, and attendance monitoring programs. Finally, within Alternative Education, program support provided for a Dropout Prevention Specialist and a community liaison for attendance monitoring of students enrolled in these programs.

6. *DISTRICT-WIDE EFFORTS*

These efforts included program administration and evaluation, the Native American Student Advocate who assured that all Native American students were systematically monitored and supported toward graduation, teleteaching personnel who supported the district system of alternatives for long term suspension and general program supplies.

HOW CAN DROPOUT PREVENTION EFFORTS BE EVALUATED?

Measureable goals related to dropout prevention were developed, tracked, and reported for all program components. At the conclusion of each school year, program evaluation occurred at three levels: 1. The number of students impacted within each of the allocations were reported. These same students were followed and supported as they continued in school. 2. Measurable goals established at target sites were reported and analyzed to identify program success and determine continued funding. And, 3. The district dropout rate that included a breakdown in terms of ethnicity, sex, and grade was reported district-wide as well as disaggregated into individual middle and high school rates, a middle school rate, a high school rate, and a District rate for grades 7-12.

ARE THE DISTRICT-WIDE DROPOUT PREVENTION EFFORTS MAKING A DIFFERENCE?

The reported results reflect data after the Dropout Prevention Plan had been implemented for four years, the 1993-94 was the first full implementation year. To review, the dropout rate serves as a 12 month snapshot of all enrollment in grades 7-12 in the district. Any withdrawal that occurred without evidence of reenrollment was considered a dropout. Student mobility, a lack of reporting of reenrollment, and accuracy of reporting all effect the accuracy of this statistic. As the reader can review (Table 1), the dropout rate comparisons for the district show a decrease in the district total (grades 7-12) from 8.1% during the 1993-94 to 7.96% during the 1994-95 school year. This reduction again continued to a low of 7.35% during the 1995-96 school year.

1993/94- 1995/96 DROPOUT RATE COMPARISONS

Table 1

	1993-94	1994-95	1995-96
DISTRICT TOTAL (Grades 7-12)	8.1 %	7.96%	7.35%

This reduction is particularly noteworthy since the mandated procedure for the calculation of student dropout rates was changed by the State of Arizona for the 1994-95 rates. As a result, given the same circumstances as during 1993-94 and because the formula change lowered the denominator of the fraction that is used to calculate the dropout rate, the District dropout rate was expected to increase for the 1994-95 school year.

1993-94/1995-96 DROPOUT COMPARISON SUMMARY

Table 2

1993-94	1994-95	1995-96
Enrollment (Grades 7-12)		
24,856	**25,528**	**25,292**
Dropouts		
2,665	**2,400**	**2,252**

However, even though the mandated formula change led to an expected increase, a decrease in the TUSD Dropout Rate occurred for the 1994-95 and

1995-96 school years. A summary of the dropout rate for the 1994-95 and 1995-96 school years (Table 2) leads to the following main point: Even though TUSD enrollment during the 1994-95 school year in grades 7-12 increased by over 672 students, there were 265 fewer dropouts during 1994-95 than during the 1993-94 school year. And even though in 1995-96, the enrollment figure of 25,292 declined by 236 students, the number of dropouts again decreased from previous years. These decreases in the number of students who dropped out of school during the 1994-95 and 1995-96 school years reinforces the fact that our schools and programs are making a positive difference in the area of dropout prevention. The district-wide Dropout Prevention Plan is making a positive impact.

Of particular interest was a substantial reduction in the district Native American dropout rate in grades 7-12 from 13.7% to 10.55% in 1994-95 and 8.01% in 1995-96 (Table 3). These reductions are primarily attributed to the efforts of a Dropout Prevention Native American Student Advocate, included in the District-Wide component, who worked to partner with schools in their efforts to identify, meet, and counsel all Native American students as well as consistently monitor and support student attendance, retrieve and reenroll students who may have dropped out, and identify community resources and alternatives that supported the educational needs of students. Also included within the role of the Student Advocate were consultations with staff, counseling with students and staff, and support to personnel at elementary, middle, and high schools through professional modeling, mentorship, and the delivery of specific training modules that when put to practice would positively impact dropout prevention efforts with all students.

1993-94/1995-96 DROPOUT COMPARISON SUMMARY

Table 3

DISTRICT TOTAL GRADES 7 - 12	1993-94	1994-95	1994-95
White/Anglo	6.0%	**6.26%**	**5.23%**
African American	7.3%	**7.66%**	**6.13%**
Hispanic	10.5%	**10.08%**	**10.28%**
Native American	13.7%	**10.55%**	**8.01%**
Asian American	4.3%	**5.39%**	**3.37%**

At the site level, it should be noted that one middle school dramatically decreased their dropout rate from the 1993-94 rate of 12.68% to a 1994-95 rate of 1.38%. In addition, one high school decreased from the 1993-94 rate of 13.98% to 7.62%. Both of these decreases were attributed to a focus on monitoring and supporting students toward graduation as well as a focus on attendance monitoring.

WHAT NEXT?

Although there is a great deal more to accomplish, the decreases in numbers of students who have dropped out of school over the past four years do indicate that the efforts of many teachers, administrators, parents, students, and community members in areas related to dropout prevention, intervention, and retrieval are making a difference throughout the District. These improvements lead to more of our students staying in school. As the fifth year of full

implementation of the District Plan begins, it is our intention that these improvements continue and result in further decreases in the number of students who drop out of school prior to graduation. In addition, we remain open to innovative ways that may further involve our community in these efforts. With the overall plan in mind and action, the result of our Mission will be certain: By creating an equitable, diverse, and quality educational environment conducive to living, learning, and teaching; TUSD will ensure that all students graduate from high school.

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